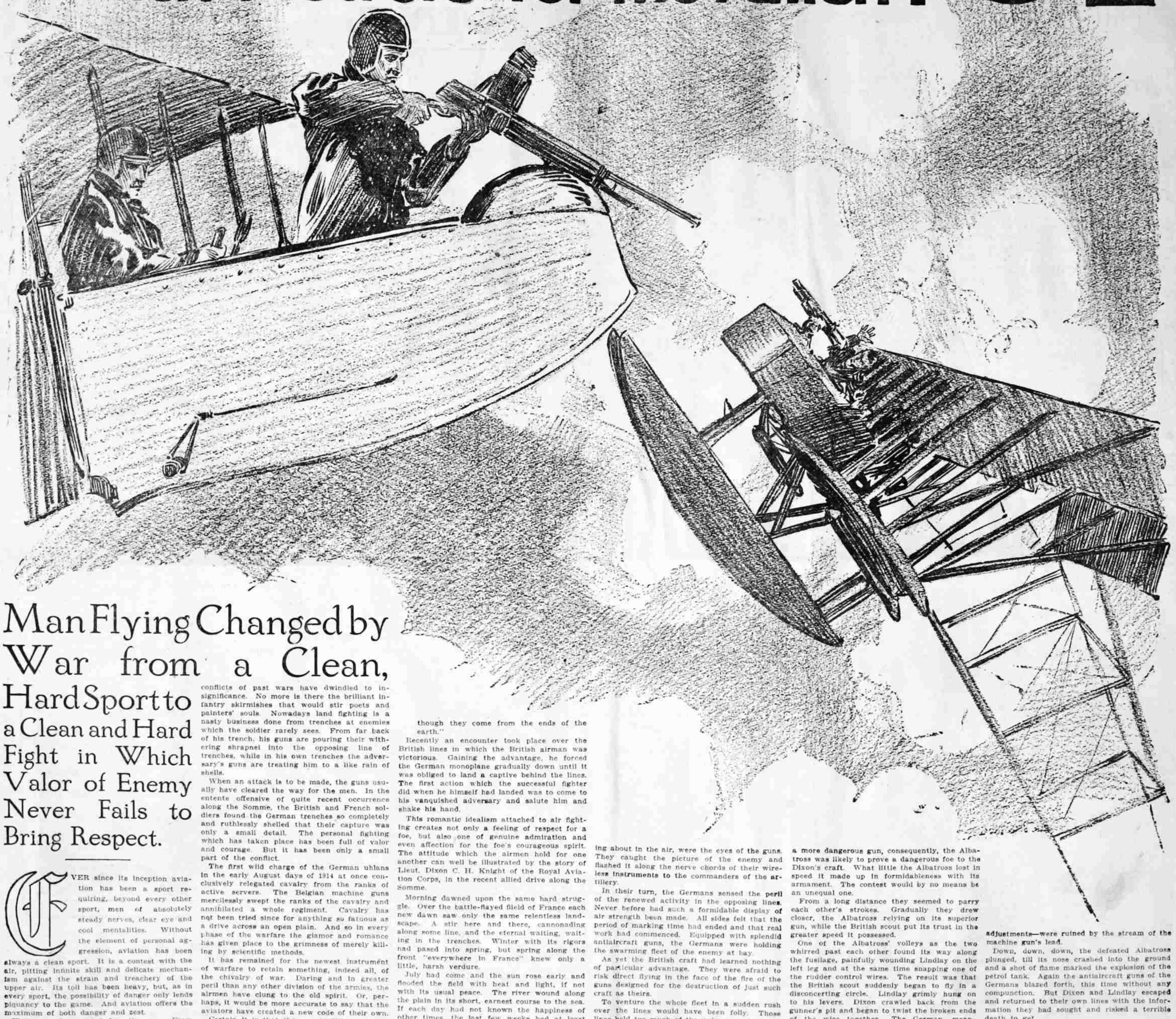
Magazine Feature Section

Winged Death for the Living Then Flowers for the Fallen FOE



Man Flying Changed by War from a Clean, Hard Sport to a Clean and Hard Fight in Which Valor of Enemy Never Fails to Bring Respect.

EVER since its inception aviation has been a sport requiring, beyond every other sport, men of absolutely steady nerves, clear eye and cool mentalities. Without the element of personal aggression, aviation has been always a clean sport. It is a contest with the air, pitting infinite skill and delicate mechanism against the strain and treachery of the upper air. Its toll has been heavy, but, as in every sport, the possibility of danger only lends piquancy to the game. And aviation offers the maximum of both danger and zest.

That was the sport before the war. From what was more or less of a game, aviation has been changed by the great struggle to the serious business of war. To the natural danger of the sport has been added the greater peril of deadly-in-earnest gun fire. The same skill, cultivated much more intensively, has found its outlet in flying through the air on scout duty over the enemies' lines amidst the volleys from the anti-aircraft guns from below and the thrusts of enemy air battleships from all around.

From a clean, hard sport, it has changed to clean, hard fighting.

Other branches of the service have lost all semblance of the old glamor which used to shed its gleam around them; they have become mere matter-of-fact processes, with only the grim end of destruction in view. War at best has only this end, but previously there has been attached to war a certain humanness—the personal side, which the present conflict seems to have obliterated. In place of the personal element in former wars, this one is all science and absolute conformity to mechanical standards. The man phase is more or less disregarded, or regarded as merely part of the mechanism.

The glory of the sea has been dimmed by the advent of the submarine. Those silent, invisible freighters of death have turned the romantic recklessness of sea fighters into the wary caution of battlers with the unknown. Direct conflict at sea has been reduced to a minimum. Torpedoes, long-range guns, mines and other modern methods have tended to this result.

Trench fighting has also caused a great change in the aspect of war. The hand-to-hand conflicts of past wars have dwindled to insignificance. No more is there the brilliant infantry skirmishes that would stir poets and painters' souls. Nowadays land fighting is a nasty business done from trenches at enemies which the soldier rarely sees. From far back of his trench, his guns are pouring their withering shrapnel into the opposing line of trenches, while in his own trenches the adversary's guns are treating him to a like rain of shells.

When an attack is to be made, the guns usually have cleared the way for the men. In the entente offensive of quite recent occurrence along the Somme, the British and French soldiers found the German trenches so completely and ruthlessly shelled that their capture was only a small detail. The personal fighting which has taken place has been full of valor and courage. But it has been only a small part of the conflict.

The first wild charge of the German uhlans in the early August days of 1914 at once conclusively relegated cavalry from the ranks of active servers. The Belgian machine guns mercilessly swept the ranks of the cavalry and annihilated a whole regiment. Cavalry has not been tried since for anything so fatuous as a drive across an open plain. And so in every phase of the warfare the glamor and romance has given place to the grimness of merely killing by scientific methods.

It has remained for the newest instrument of warfare to retain something, indeed all, of the chivalry of war. Daring and in greater peril than any other division of the armies, the airmen have clung to the old spirit. Or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that the aviators have created a new code of their own.

Certain it is that the war traditions of centuries, while they seem to have largely departed from modern war, are, nevertheless, cherished and partially transformed by the flying squads of every nation. A word should be coined for their spirit, a word that would bear the same relation to aviators that chivalry does to the mounted warriors of mediaeval history.

Whenever a Zeppelin is shot down on a raid of England, its crew has always been accorded a military burial. The civil authorities and civilians have frequently declaimed against the practice on the ground that men engaged in such horrible work as killing noncombatants should be treated with as little consideration as they show. But the aerial defenders think differently; they respect brave men carrying out, without question, the orders of their government.

Probably the element of personal contact involved in air fighting as it is involved in few other phases of the war accounts for the gallant spirit which the air warriors display toward one another. In the air game, the pitiless science part of war becomes a shadow, and fighting narrows down to two men who pit their courage and skill against two men of the enemy doing the same thing.

Any feeling of kindliness for an enemy is not to be mistaken for weakness. It is not friendliness for the enemy himself that is shown; the tenacity with which they fight disproves that. Rather is it the admiration of brave men for brave men, for—

"There is no East nor West, border nor breed
nor birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth."

Recently an encounter took place over the British lines in which the British airman was victorious. Gaining the advantage, he forced the German monoplane gradually down until it was obliged to land a captive behind the lines. The first action which the successful fighter did when he himself had landed was to come to his vanquished adversary and salute him and shake his hand.

This romantic idealism attached to air fighting creates not only a feeling of respect for a foe, but also one of genuine admiration and even affection for the foe's courageous spirit. The attitude which the airmen hold for one another can well be illustrated by the story of Lieut. Dixon C. H. Knight of the Royal Aviation Corps, in the recent allied drive along the Somme.

Morning dawned upon the same hard struggle. Over the battle-flayed field of France each new dawn saw only the same relentless landscape. A stir here and there, cannonading along some line, and the eternal waiting, waiting in the trenches. Winter with its rigors had passed into spring, but spring along the front "everywhere in France" knew only a little, harsh verdure.

July had come and the sun rose early and flooded the field with heat and light, if not with its usual peace. The river wound along the plain in its short, earnest course to the sea. If each day had not known the happiness of other times, the last few weeks had at least seen a certain calm settle down in which the fighting had changed from desultory to practically none at all.

But this day the very air seemed full of a potent difference—a change. In the trenches which at the same time faced the sun and the forces of the central powers, there was a new movement. And back of the lines, far to the rear, the size and importance of the returned activities after lethargic days of waiting, increased and took on various aspects. The word had come. The advance, awaited alike by the soldiers and the world, had been ordered. The invader was to be driven out. France was to be cleared and England to be made secure.

In those trenches of the north which rested in the valley of the Somme, it was the British soldiers who had gotten the word. In the rear the gunners were making ready for the gruelling task before them. Wagon trains and truck trains were bringing in the tons of ammunition that was to render the earth an inferno and the heavens a reeking mass of acrid fire.

One by one the air craft mounted into their element. Their's now was the preliminary work. Where the German guns and trenches were posted had not been determined by the British gunners. In this war, more than any other, the gunners do not sight their target before the fighting begins.

Like a swarm of hornets the aeroplanes of the English filled the high altitudes above the lines. They must be away and beyond to observe the position of the enemy, to make notes on his strength, to give the intelligence which would direct the gun fire. The big guns so far back from the line had to see. These craft, flying about in the air, were the eyes of the guns. They caught the picture of the enemy and flashed it along the nerve chords of their wireless instruments to the commanders of the artillery.

In their turn, the Germans sensed the peril of the renewed activity in the opposing lines. Never before had such a formidable display of air strength been made. All sides felt that the period of marking time had ended and that real work had commenced. Equipped with splendid antiaircraft guns, the Germans were holding the swarming fleet of the enemy at bay.

As yet the British craft had learned nothing of particular advantage. They were afraid to risk direct flying in the face of the fire of the guns designed for the destruction of just such craft as theirs.

To venture the whole fleet in a sudden rush over the lines would have been folly. Those lines held too much of the unknown. Only one must proceed, no matter what the danger. The strength of the enemy must be appraised first before he was seriously attacked. Scouting is never done by whole companies; it is too delicate work for that.

Lieut. Dixon and his aviator, Martin Lindlay, would go.

The British machine was one of the 100 horse-power scout ships which could best do the hard, fast work required by the undertaking. Mounted ahead of the pilot was the machine gun, which protruded like a menacing finger.

Dixon and Lindlay ascended with their craft and proceeded at once to the tremendous altitudes which meant security. Over the enemies' lines they soared, far too high to be touched by the antiaircraft guns, even if so small a target could be hit. But, at the same time, the British airmen were too high for any effective work. To them, the slim thread of the river and the mere movement of life was all that was perceptible from their height.

Then the dangerous part of the expedition began. The descent was started and to the men in the plane it seemed that the earth was coming up to meet them. And as it came, it began to spout little puffs of smoke straight into the air. The gray forms below, their line of forward trenches, the guns posted in the rear—all this Dixon and Lindlay saw. Far to the west was the other line of trenches, the British works.

Like a knight taking up the gauntlet thrown down before him, a great German Albatross slowly mounted to the air to give battle to the solitary observer overhead. Heavier and with a more dangerous gun, consequently, the Albatross was likely to prove a dangerous foe to the Dixon's craft. What little the Albatross lost in speed it made up in formidableness with its armament. The contest would by no means be an unequal one.

From a long distance they seemed to parry each other's strokes. Gradually they drew closer, the Albatross relying on its superior gun, while the British scout put its trust in the greater speed it possessed.

One of the Albatross' volleys as the two whirred past each other found its way along the fusilage, painfully wounding Lindlay on the left leg and at the same time snapping one of the rudder control wires. The result was that the British scout suddenly began to fly in a disconcerting circle. Lindlay grimly hung on to his levers. Dixon crawled back from the gunner's pit and began to twist the broken ends of the wire together. The German, meanwhile, had checked the headlong direction of its flight and had turned again to the combat.

Perceiving the helpless, short circles in which the British were flying, the German pilot realized about what had happened, and valiantly withdrew a little distance, the gunner at the same time withholding his fire. The Germans knew that if the British plane was helpless its only alternative would be to descend.

But Dixon had other hopes. With deftness and dispatch he had fixed the broken strands of wire, and, with the assurances of Lindlay that the pain in his leg was not too great to continue the battle, the British craft straightened out its course and flew to a position far opposite the Albatross.

From below, the men in the trenches watched breathlessly the outcome of the conflict. Should the scout be defeated it would mean for the Germans that the aerial work of the British would at least receive a check sufficient to hold them off for some time. To the British gunners the information which Dixon and Lindlay had obtained was of the greatest importance.

The struggle was renewed, each craft coming in great swoops toward the other. This time, in passing, the British craft made a sudden swift turn just at the moment of greatest peril, swung under the Albatross, and completed a U-shaped maneuver which brought Dixon and Lindlay up athwart the rear of the Albatross.

It was the trick each had been trying to turn on the other. Lindlay had been successful; the fate of the Albatross had been determined. From the prow, Dixon seized the advantage and raked the heart of the Albatross. The German fighters received mortal wounds, and the delicate parts of the German engine—the wires and adjustments—were ruined by the stream of the machine gun's lead.

Down, down, down, the defeated Albatross plunged, till its nose crashed into the ground and a shot of flame marked the explosion of the petrol tank. Again the antiaircraft guns of the Germans blazed forth, this time without any compunction. But Dixon and Lindlay escaped and returned to their own lines with the information they had sought and risked a terrible death to get.

In the dull haze of the next morning's dawn the somberness of war was intensified. As the opposing forces sprang to life, from the British guns the first shots of that awful bombardment which preceded the Somme offensive began to rumble. Dixon and Lindlay's observations had been invaluable.

The angry roars of the guns' spouting increased with the advance of day. Great arcs, screaming death, showed where the shrapnel pierced the air. Above, the eyes of the guns, the aerial squad, began to dance about, watching the effect of the fire and directing a too great or a too short battery.

Counter activity marked the Germans' response. Their guns began to return the fire and the men made ready for the weird eventualities which war hardens men to.

From above, they again noticed a high-flying plane, maneuvering very much as the one had on the previous day. The daring aviator, now far in enemy territory, continued to disregard the danger he was in and to drop lower and lower. Soon he was close enough for the Germans to discern the details of his craft.

Something fluttering dropped from his prow and floated down to earth, finding rest amidst the wreckage of the Albatross. And, even as he mounted, a cheer followed him and the guns stopped their firing at him. Straight back to the British lines he went—and reported nothing of what they had seen. The second flight was not one of observation.

"Whew!" gasped Dixon to Lindlay, when they climbed out of the scout ship. "Those fellows certainly tried their best to pepper us. But I think a few flowers was little enough for such fighters as the Albatross bore yesterday."